

ARNOLD BERLEANT

## AESTHETICS AND THE ARTS OF ENGAGEMENT

### I.

The history of aesthetic inquiry in the West goes back nearly two thousand years, though it is not as ancient as mediations on art in Asian cultures. Yet despite its early origins in both traditions, questions on the meaning and value of beauty, on art, and on qualitative experience more generally continue to puzzle scholars and artists alike. Much of the discussion has to do with the direction of inquiry that helps account for the history and experience of aesthetic values: whether we can find guidance from ancient speculation, from universal first principles, from a scientific model, from an analytical inquiry into basic concepts, or from creative practices, themselves. Each approach leads in a different direction, resulting in a tangle of claims that have no common base. It seems that concord in aesthetic understanding, as in political and social dispute, is not only elusive but may be impossible. Perhaps it will be more productive to look in a different direction—away from tradition, away from textual study, away from the search for first principles, and toward creative practices and the experiential values they promote.

Some time ago I proposed an approach to aesthetic inquiry that led in a new direction and produced some novel insights.<sup>1</sup> This was to abandon traditional principles and received doctrine and to look instead for guidance in the practices and innovative directions in the work of artists, themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> I have made this claim in a number of publications, most particularly in “Aesthetics and the Contemporary Arts” (= BERLEANT 1970; reprinted BERLEANT 2004; Polish translation: 2007); *The Philosophy of the Visual Arts* (= BERLEANT 1992), and in part in *Esthetics Contemporary*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1978). The basic insight was the subject of my book *The Aesthetic Field: A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (= BERLEANT 1970b) and formed the underlying theme of the work that followed.

Of course, such an approach might seem to beg the question by assuming that the values we identify as aesthetic are most direct and striking in such uncustomary practices. Yet if we recognize that aesthetic value rests at bottom on perceptual enhancement and insight, creative activities that pursue such values may be considered *prima facie* to be aesthetic quite apart from judgments of merit. That is, aesthetic activity and artistic merit, while related, are different matters. This is a way of saying that the association of art with aesthetic value may vary but is different from questions of merit. There are no grounds for presuming that all artistic activities, products, and experiences enhance the depth and quality of perceptual experience. Nor can we say that perceptual experience must to some degree be positive: that it is not so is evident to people from an early age by direct responses of distaste, disgust, and repugnance. Among the more innovative extensions of the scope of artistic activity are works that use, as materials, decaying matter, ordure, junk, and trash, as well as subject-matter that arouses disgust, repugnance, and feelings of unease and vulnerability. The question of the negative domain of aesthetic perception is an important subject and requires elaboration on its own terms.<sup>2</sup>

This is far from holding that aesthetic value subsists exclusively in art. Aesthetic gratification has been associated with the natural landscape; with the human figure; and in sensation and perception *per se*; as well. Yet if we are guided by a pragmatic methodological principle, it seems promising to look for evidence of the aesthetic in the activities and practices associated with the various arts such as music, poetry, painting, drama, and the novel; arts that were seen as producing perceptual experiences that possess inherent value in their very occurrence. Yet the arts have proved to be a troublesome subject for philosophers. Since Plato, they have endeavored to place such a diversity of perception and practice under all-inclusive concepts and theories. Of course, we want to bring order into the confusion of experience, for how else can we deal with things rationally and consistently? Perhaps the central issue is not one of consistency but of priority: Which should come first, reason or experience? Thus we again face the age-old conflict between rationalism and empiricism.

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<sup>2</sup> A preliminary discussion of negative aesthetics appears in my book *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (= BERLEANT 2010), Ch. 9: "The Negative Aesthetics of Everyday Life," Ch. 10: "Art, Terrorism, and the Negative Sublime." Polish translation: *Prze-myśleć estetykę. Niepokorne eseje o sztuce*. See also MANDOKI 2007. I elaborate on negative aesthetics in my forthcoming book, *Critical Aesthetics*.

But is the choice of a beginning only personal and arbitrary? Can we choose freely from among the various proposals: Descartes' method of doubt, Locke's ideas of sensation and reflection, Hume's impressions, Husserl's transcendental ego? Does that rational ideal work for the activities and experiences of the arts, so deeply funded in experience? Isn't there a temporal order, an order of experience in which we recur to the primary data?

## II.

The decades immediately following World War II were a period of striking innovation in the arts. However, at the same time, the philosophy of art remained mired in the slough of concepts that Kant had theorized so compellingly at the close of the eighteenth century. His was a theory based on an epistemological model that developed criteria for judging beauty but with little reference to the arts. Kant, himself, had little encounter with artistic practice, and the standards of judgment he developed were founded on distinctions that conformed to the architectonic demands of his theory of knowledge, a theory that had its roots in platonism. He proposed the view that aesthetic value consisted in the disinterested contemplation of an object for its own sake on whose value there is universal agreement.<sup>3</sup>

In an earlier study I suggested that the study of aesthetics, rather than being derived from first principles, would benefit, in particular, from knowledge of contemporary developments in the arts. These innovations appear as the vanguard of perceptual changes, and of cultural change more generally. These came at a time, half a century ago, when aesthetic inquiry, like philosophy in general, had turned, not to the arts and the data of experience, but to logical analysis and the study of language. Language became its scripture and Wittgenstein its messiah.

But is the choice of a beginning only personal and arbitrary? Can the rational ideal of the tradition work for inquiry in aesthetics? Isn't there a temporal as well as a rational order, an order of experience in which we are able to recur to the primary data not in theory but in practice: Descartes' method of doubt, Locke's ideas of sensation and reflection, Hume's impressions, Husserl's transcendental ego? Beginning in the late nineteenth century

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<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790), First Book: *Analytic of the Beautiful*. This classic presentation can hardly be reduced to a single sentence. One must consider the nuances and implications of the whole of the First Part.

challenges to that tradition had begun to be made: first by Bergson, certainly by Dewey, and later by Merleau-Ponty, but the “official” view remained largely unchanged. As the twentieth century matured, these innovative thinkers began to inspire major changes in culture and consciousness.

Consider some historical observations. In the West during the years immediately following WWII, profound political changes and transformative technological innovations had, with increasing force, begun to radically alter social life and practice throughout the developed world. And the arts, reflecting and embodying these changes, increased the momentum of their own transfiguration. Major changes in the arts had begun in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as artists began to emancipate themselves from representational fidelity and other such conventions that had long dominated artistic practice. By the middle of the twentieth century, major changes in the arts were occurring with increasing rapidity—alterations in their practices, their media and materials, their scope, and their cultural role. We could no longer consider the arts to consist of self-sufficient objects to be contemplated disinterestedly for their own sake. Nor could we focus inwardly on the satisfactions and pleasures of contemplation. It seemed then that it would be instructive to look at currents and developments in the arts at that time for insight and guidance rather than to debate meanings and interpretations that reflected conventional canons of acceptability.

The technological and stylistic innovations that then appeared to be so striking were even more significant in the perceptual demands they imposed. As I wrote then, “of the many changes in cultural experience, two seem to have had special significance for the arts. The first was the rise of industrial production, which transformed the characteristic features that objects possessed and led to the use of new materials, objects, and techniques in artistic practice. Second were the fundamental social changes that came about through increasing democratization, in particular the emergence of population masses and a corresponding mass culture, generating new perceptual activities and reaffirming a social function for the arts. Together, new artistic materials and objects and new perceptual activities [were] embodied in some strikingly different forms and movements in the arts themselves, and it is these that present the challenge to aesthetics” (BERLEANT 1970a).

It is essential to give particular notice to the alterations that took place in perceptual experience. These involved more than revolutionary changes in materials and technologies of artistic production; aesthetic perception had also changed radically, leading to “the perceptual integration of all the ele-

ments in the aesthetic situation into a unified experience. Not only were the distinctions obscured between the creator of art, the aesthetic perceiver, the art object, and the performer; their functions tended to overlap and merge, as well, becoming continuous in the course of aesthetic experience,”<sup>4</sup> and thus expanding the boundaries of aesthetic perception. Along with the enlargement of our sensory responsiveness came the breakdown of aesthetic prohibitions, and none is more significant than that against the sensual (see BERLEANT 1964; reprinted in BERLEANT 2004). Everything was recognized and allowed, and this led to changes not only in the arts but in their practice and their appreciation.

New trends emerged, such as the ashcan school and new realism in painting and the popularity of theater-in-the-round. This theatrical innovation set the stage at ground level and raised the audience to surround the stage on all sides, while interaction between the actors and the audience became common. Aesthetic sensibility was expanded to include all the senses, while the subjects of the arts were no longer romantic idealizations but the ordinary and the mundane.

A major consequence of these transformative changes was the enlargement of aesthetic sensibility. To the classically acceptable senses of sight and hearing were added all the avenues and modalities by which sensory perception takes place, the proximal along with the distal. The art object was no longer confined within its frame and began to play a more active part. Such transgressions occurred not only with the art object but became equally true of the perceiver, the artist, and the performer. Moreover, these aesthetic functions were not confined to separate roles in the aesthetic situation but their functions were integrated and shared.

The activity of the art object contributed to a second major change in aesthetic perception. No longer removed from the contemplative observer, the art object turned into an active force that imposed itself on the viewer. From walk-in sculpture, audience-activated art, and the forceful visuality of optical art to the subtle influence of the forms and colors in abstract expressionism on one’s state of mind and mood, the art object was no longer passive, no longer content to remain bounded by the frame or isolated by distance.

Third, the viewer or audience began to participate more actively in the aesthetic process, pushing the sculpture into movement or activating a framed work by passing before it and setting off sensors that alter its surface. By

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<sup>4</sup> This and all subsequent quotations, unless otherwise attributed, are from “Aesthetics and the Contemporary Arts.” See footnote 1.

such technological innovations, the viewer became a co-creator. “Not only were the distinctions obscured between the creator of art, the aesthetic perceiver, the art object, and the performer; their functions have tended to overlap and merge, as well, becoming continuous in the course of appreciative experience.” To describe this newly integrated and active aesthetic situation, I elaborated the concept of an “aesthetic field” (cf. BERLEANT 1970b).<sup>5</sup> If we can assign to the eighteenth century the consolidation of aesthetic speculation into a coherent theoretical structure, we can recognize in the twentieth a thorough undermining of that edifice. This was taking place in a society and technology altered irrevocably by the disruptive influence of the armed conflicts that succeeded the Second World War.

I have already noted many of the innovative shifts that took place in the practices of aesthetic production and experience: the expansion of the aesthetic to embrace ordinary objects, situations, and experiences; the emancipation from the need to represent the ideal in form and subject-matter, and the total abandonment of verisimilitude. Once-radical art movements come to mind, such as impressionism, fauvism, cubism, surrealism, expressionism, and abstraction in painting; the rejection of tonality and tertiary harmony in music; and the industrial ideal embodied in modernist architecture that embodied and elevated the design values inherent in mass production and functionalism. These expansive thrusts in the arts paralleled the industrialization of culture into a mass phenomenon with new perceptual activities that were intense, insistent, and all-encompassing. Aesthetic sensibility was enlarged, democratized, and transformed.

Such fundamental changes called for a new account that would explain them and rationalize their occurrence. What was needed was an aesthetics that could accommodate this expanded aesthetic domain, not by excluding the presumed threats to convention but, instead, by altering the theoretical frame to justify and include them. Such an account demanded three basic changes in the traditional aesthetic. One was expanding the range of aesthetic value beyond the arts and into the conditions and objects of ordinary life, while the second enlarged the range of aesthetic value to include negativity. Finally, these required integrating aesthetic experience into a perceptual field that combined the creative, appreciative, objective (i.e. focused), and performative functions in what I called aesthetic engagement.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Chinese edition, Wuhan University Press, forthcoming 2021.

<sup>6</sup> *The Aesthetic Field* offers such an account.

## III.

How does that century of radical innovation look half a century later? Were these innovations just surveyed merely passing fashions or did they prefigure a major shift in sensibility and practice? How well does the aesthetic devised to account for those changes fare in retrospect? Were these aberrances or must we revise our idea of aesthetics beyond the disinterested contemplation of a discrete object? Such questions challenge the traditional, customary account. It would be best to begin by considering how the innovative arts and art practices that appeared significant in my earlier account have fared before turning to an assessment of the present state of things.

We have reviewed some of the radical art movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, among them cubism, impressionism, fauvism, surrealism, and expressionism. These were succeeded by newer developments such as pop art, optical art, photorealism, abstract expressionism, and minimal art.<sup>7</sup> These stylistic innovations began to move away from representational realism, bringing the artist's imagination more directly into the visual field, making demands on viewers' knowledge and imagination, and offering more direct visual, sensuous gratification. These movements were all distinctive and often unrelated, but they shared the same expansive and transformative impulse.

All these have been widely discussed and are familiar to museum goers and other lovers of the visual arts. Of special interest for us here are more recent developments in the arts, practices that do not contravene the perceptual thrust of their more famous predecessors but extend them in imaginative and sometimes disconcerting ways. Take, for example, ways in which the body has entered into artistic practice, not merely as its referent or subject-matter, but physically in body art, body piercing, and performance art more generally. At times the audience collaborates by joining with the artist or performer. The many forms performance art and collaborative art have taken are unpredictable, limited only by the imagination of the artist.

It is not difficult to cite other directions in which artists have moved. The walk-through sculptures of Henry Moore have metamorphosed in the hands of other artists into total environments that the "viewer" enters and activates. Alternatively, one can go from the pole of site-specific art that inhabits its

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<sup>7</sup> These examples come mainly from the visual arts, since they are best known. Those familiar with developments in theater, music, literature, and other domains of aesthetic creativity and practice can readily cite others.

location to the other pole of conceptual sculpture where the physical form is dematerialized and the creative product becomes the thought or image that the appreciator projects into that location. Then there is pop art that crosses the boundary between art and popular culture, and hyperrealism that carries representation to the extreme, where virtuosic technique makes the visual rendering nearly indistinguishable from the actuality it represents. Bio-art is a still different direction of creative imagination. Here art works are fashioned in studios and laboratories out of bacteria, tissues, and living plants and animals using genetic knowledge and processes, as in the work of Eduardo Kac. And in an entirely different direction, there is what has been called relational aesthetics, in which human relations and their social context are taken as an aesthetic whole. As its originator, Nicholas Bourriaud, claims, "The artwork creates a social environment in which people come together to participate in a shared activity." "The role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever scale chosen by the artist" (BOURRIAUD 2002, 113). The gallery scene is not only the venue for viewing art but becomes the art work itself. To this can be added art and theater works that employ immersive or virtual reality, along with the various expressions of virtual art.

Beyond the proliferation of new techniques and new arts that expand the reach of the aesthetic beyond customary bounds, entirely new regions have emerged in recent scholarship that identify and critique aesthetic value in uncustomary places. One of the most prominent in the past half-century is widespread interest in environmental aesthetics. Born of a renewed concern for the proliferation of industrial practices that pollute and damage the environmental conditions within which people live has come a growing awareness of the fragile values of the non-human world. No longer an endless resource to be exploited without thought of consequences, the awareness of those effects has been imposed on us with the global results of atmospheric and ocean warming. Proper recognition and response have not yet begun and will demand enormous changes in social and political practices that will have transformative consequences for political organization. Along with adapting to environmental changes has come a greater awareness of rapidly changing environmental experience. On the other side of the scale, a new direction in aesthetic research that has recently emerged in what is known as "everyday aesthetics," which recognizes the presence and importance of aesthetic values and experiences in the ordinary objects and circumstances of



daily life. These practices and movements are among the more prominent phenomena of the artworld and of aesthetic experience. The list could readily be extended into all the modalities and materials of the arts.<sup>8</sup>

What, now, can we make of all this richness of practice and product? Can anything be inferred of their significance for aesthetics? It now seems clear that many of the prominent innovations in style, media, and practice developing in the arts that can be discerned from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth-impulses toward the expansion of boundaries, materials, and perception, have, in the last fifty years, evolved into common practices and distinct new artistic media and styles. The creative artist deliberately enlists the appreciative observer and the audience to join in the creation of art in both its traditional modes as well as the many new techniques, media, and practices. In one way or another, the art object has become incomplete without the contribution of the appreciative viewer. The observer may even join with the artist to become an activator or performer of the art. Nor is the work a passive recipient of their creative actions. As in op art or novels with alternative endings from which the reader must choose, the audience joins with the artist as an originative force in achieving the final art work. These developments represent the culmination of the expansive tendencies identified earlier. We can see this as art returning to its origins as a communal process: its denouement in an aesthetics of engagement.

The panoramic sweep of this survey of the vastly enlarged world of art and aesthetic experience is no substitute for the careful research and scholarship of art historians and social historians. My purpose here has been to recognize a trend that is pronounced and definite. I leave it to future scholars to identify the particular features, factors, trends, and stages in this evolutionary transfiguration of the aesthetic process.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The innovations in art and appreciative experience I have cited may be seen as an invitation to explore the encyclopedic resources of the internet to search for examples and explanations of these practices and movements. The choreographer William Forsythe calls his dance creations a collaborative process. In the spirit of the contemporary arts, we might call the practice of the reader supplying examples and illustrations, “collaborative scholarship.”

<sup>9</sup> After completing this paper, I discovered that it corroborates practices and exemplifications of the theoretical view presented half a century ago in my *The Aesthetic Field: A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (= BERLEANT 1970b). This proposed the construct of an aesthetic field in which four principal factors (a creative, an objective, a perceptual, and a performative) enter into mutually interactive and interdependent relationships in the aesthetic situation.

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## AESTHETICS AND THE ARTS OF ENGAGEMENT

## Summary

In an earlier study I suggested that the study of aesthetics, rather than being derived from first principles, would benefit, in particular, from knowledge of contemporary developments in the arts. Over the last two centuries, social, technological, and cultural changes have had a transformative effect on the arts and on aesthetic experience. Such fundamental changes called for a new account that would explain them and rationalize their occurrence. I proposed integrating aesthetic experience into a perceptual field that combined the creative, appreciative, objective (i.e. focused), and performative functions in what I called aesthetic engagement. Over the past half century, trends in the arts and their experience have moved more emphatically away from discrete objects and disinterested contemplation, fulfilling the transition to an aesthetic of active engagement of artist, appreciator, object and performer in an experiential aesthetic field

**Keywords:** aesthetic engagement; aesthetic field; aesthetic perception; innovation.

## ESTETYKA I SZTUKA ZAANGAŻOWANIA

## Streszczenie

We wcześniejszym opracowaniu zasugerowałem, że badanie estetyki, zamiast wychodzić od podstawowych zasad, przyniosłoby większe korzyści przez zaznajomienie ze współczesnymi osiągnięciami w sztuce. W ciągu ostatnich dwóch stuleci przemiany społeczne, technologiczne i kulturowe wywarły wielki wpływ na sztukę i doznania estetyczne. Owe fundamentalne zmiany wymagały nowego opisu, który by je objaśniał i racjonalizował. Zaproponowałem zintegrowanie doświadczenia estetycznego z polem percepcyjnym, które łączy w sobie funkcje twórcze, aprecjacyjne, obiektywne i performatywne w tym, co nazwałem zaangażowaniem estetycznym. W ciągu ostatniego półwiecza trendy w sztuce i ich doświadczeniu coraz wyraźniej odchodziły od dyskretnych przedmiotów i bezinteresownej kontemplacji, realizując przejście do estetyki aktywnego zaangażowania artysty, aprecjatora, przedmiotu i performerera w doświadczalnej dziedzinie estetycznej.

*Przełożył Stanisław Sarek*

**Słowa kluczowe:** estetyczne zaangażowanie; pole estetyczne; percepcja estetyczna; innowacja.